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SUBJECT: TUVA: LONELY REPUBLIC SEEKS STABLE RELATIONSHIP
WITH...ANYONE

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¶1. (SBU) Summary. A recent trip to the remote Siberian republic of Tuva revealed overwhelming support for the ruling United Russia party, but social and economic isolation from the rest of the country. The capital of Tuva trumpeted no major businesses and relied on government allocations, small business development, and limited tourism for its success. With his recent criticism of federal government incompetency for declining social and economic conditions in the region, Republic of Tuva leader Kara-ool sparked old and improbable rumors that the republic would secede from Russia. Facing the highest unemployment levels in Siberia, Tuvan economic leaders pointed to the importance of a proposed railroad from Krasnoyarsk and the reestablishment of direct flights to Moscow as to its financial future. Local leaders are considering designating shamanism, a prominent practice in Siberia, as a religion rather than a tradition, with shamans further roiled by a proposal to elect the first Supreme Shaman of Russia. The majority Buddhist population enjoys freedom of worship without constraint. End Summary.

In Tuva, United Russia Is the Only Show in Town

¶2. (SBU) Officials in Tuva noted that United Russia maintained a firm grasp on the administration's reins. Local party head Sonam Eres Mongun-oolovich told us that recent party polling across the republic indicated that approximately 90 percent of Tuvan's residents supported United Russia and its policies. Certainly, past indicators (reftel) and local council election results from the towns of Turan and Ak-Dovurak served as evidence of United Russia's popularity, with polling stations in both locations recording 80 to 93 percent support for its candidates. When asked about the reason for the party's popularity, Mongun-oolovich stated that the population simply "believed in Medvedev and Putin" and, of course, supported local hero and Minister of Emergency Situations Sergey Shoygu's role in the administration. Yet, Mongun-oolovich quickly admitted that local party members would not consider deviating from or tweaking the national party platform to fit local needs, saying that "we simply implement the plans from Moscow."

¶3. (SBU) Local Communist Party of the Russian Federation (KPRF) leader Vladimir Gubtsov told us that 10 percent of the Tuvan Republic population backed his party, but he "felt confident" that as many as 30 percent could be persuaded to vote for the KPRF. Acknowledging that his party faced long-term hurdles since the average age of its supporters was 57, he believed that pensioners and farmers would always turn to the KPRF to fight for social equality. Peddling fundamental Communist platform issues, Gubtsov promised to work with United Russia to address the housing crisis in Kyzyl, exacerbated by Tuva's worsening rural-to-urban migration that has hobbled its civil services. He also touted a hackneyed approach to Tuva's problems: taking the money in the Russian government's oil stabilization fund and

dividing it up among its citizens so that "everyone can own a car and have something to eat."

Secession from Russia?

14. (SBU) Republic of Tuva head Sholban Kara-ool coincidentally fanned conspiracy theories about Tuvan desires for secession when he announced at an April 20 press conference that Tuvan authorities found federal government activities deleterious to the socio-economic situation in the region. Kara-ool blamed federal tax and customs officials for obstructing local businesses, a notion supported by the federal inspector for Tuva, Aleksandr Popov. Both pressed regional and federal authorities to cooperate and draft new agreements that would enable local businesses to succeed, yet no government officials could cite any concrete proposals to reach their goals. Head of the Federal Tax Service for Tuva Dmitry Kastyurin simply rebutted Kara-ool's argument by saying that Tuvan entrepreneurs had shirked tax payments for years, and now the federal government is just trying to enforce local tax payments. Rector of the University of Tuva Ondar Oktyaevich doubted that any concrete plans to resolve local social issues would materialize, telling us on April 30 that such debates have existed in Tuva for as long as he could remember. More importantly, he noted with conviction that Tuva would "remain a part of the Russian Federation, no matter what the media says."

Economic Success: Location, Location, Location

MOSCOW 00001174 002 OF 003

15. (SBU) Tuva's near isolation from the rest of Russia continues to determine, in part, its economic success or failure. Director for External Economic Affairs for Tuva Rolmaa Monge explained to us on April 29 that the development of a proposed Kuragino-Kyzyl railroad line is the most important prospective economic project for the republic, one that could "make us self-sufficient and not reliant on federal government allocations." Expected to cost almost 100 billion rubles (approximately three billion dollars) and employ 18,000 workers and 4,000 specialists, the 415 kilometer track will probably run alongside the M-54 highway, the only other overland route linking Tuva to the rest of Siberia. While a completion date has not been set, project bidding will continue until 2014. Monge highlighted Kyzyl's poor airline connections as a second hurdle to development, noting that direct flights from Moscow ceased in 2005 because of financial losses, and that Novosibirsk Avia only restarted flights to Krasnoyarsk in April 2009. Coupled with the constant threat posed by avalanches along the M-54 that block all overland traffic during Tuva's harsh winters, Monge believed that nothing significant would change in the republic until the completion of these transportation projects.

16. (SBU) Kyzyl Mayor Vyacheslav Khovalyg also alluded to the problems caused by Tuva's virtual separation from the remainder of the country. First of all, he pointed to the impact of Tuva's harsh climate (the average annual temperature is only 0.5 degrees Celsius), noting that the city administration constantly prepared for the upcoming winter. He expressed great pride that no major fuel delivery or heating accidents had occurred in the past year, an event that can become fatal considering that repairs or rescues can take a considerable amount of time and costly because of the republic's geographical isolation. Despite possessing enormous deposits of copper, cobalt, nickel, and uranium -- and the world's third largest deposit of coke coal (over 900 million tons) -- the republic has lagged far behind the rest of Russia economically, in large part because of Tuva's poor technological development and inability to transport mined materials. That said, one of the world's largest asbestos mines located in Ak-Dovurak served as Western Tuva's main

economic vehicle, an example of some limited success. Khovalyg placed a high priority on the repair of declining economic relations with Mongolia, noting that cross-border trade had dropped over 50 percent since the economic crisis.

Unemployment Buckling Tuva's Knees

17. (SBU) The recent post-crisis rise in unemployment in Russia has particularly stung, with the Omsk Guberniya news agency reporting on April 14 that "official" unemployment in the Republic of Tuva was the highest in all of Siberia at 8.5 percent. While most officials in Tuva held poker faces, stating that local unemployment numbers were even below those of European Russia, some acknowledged that unemployment constituted a huge problem and real statistics exceeded the official numbers. Drug trafficking served as a lucrative and attractive alternative to unemployment for some Tuvan youth, who helped to supply one-third of the Russian marijuana market, according to Monge. Tuva also boasted one of Russia's highest birth and highest death rates, respectively, creating potentially tense conditions for Tuva's disproportionately young population in the future.

Shamanism: Religion or Tradition?

18. (SBU) While the practice of Shamanism has served as a relatively untouched form of healing and traditional faith for centuries in Siberia, two controversial events squarely placed the practice in the spotlight. Local government officials in Tuva and its neighboring republics were considering whether to designate shamanism as a religion, requiring its practitioners to comply with registration procedures required of other religions, or as a tradition or philosophy. The ramifications for shamans in the region could be significant, especially considering the onerous reporting requirements and impact on their finances. President-for-Life of the Tuva Shamans Kenin-Lopsan Mongush supported the idea of shamanism as a religion, saying "there can be no other explanation of its power." He noted that shamans are born healers, chosen by a higher power to help others. On the other hand, in the neighboring republic of Khakassia, Society of Traditional Faith of Khakassia Shaman Viktor Kishteyev scoffed at the idea, saying that shamanism had always been a spiritual method for healing the sick -- not a religion -- and did not need regulation by the

MOSCOW 00001174 003 OF 003

Department of Health, nor the Ministry of Justice. "Those who have proposed the idea have probably never experienced a ceremony to begin with." Both the Ministries of Justice and Health continued to consider ways to regulate the practice, but with no firm deadline in sight.

19. (SBU) The second debate centered on a proposal to hold the first election in history of a Supreme Shaman of Russia. On April 27, the Shamanism Journal (www.shamanstvo.ru) released a list of 188 candidates for the election, a notion supported by the majority of shamans in the Republic of Buryatia but bitterly opposed by over 300 shamans in Tuva. In spite of the fact that 52 of the 188 candidates reside in Tuva, Mongush explained to us on April 29 that the shamans in Buryatia "have their own agenda, and only want to have power for power's sake." As one of the most respected people in Tuva, Mongush believed that pure shamanism should have no connection to politics, only to healing the sick (Note: Mongush's picture was in numerous government buildings, museums, and cafes as evidence of his local respect. End note). Subsequent to these comments, Mongush demanded that we purchase a set of his writings for 5,000 rubles (approximately 150 USD) and pass them to the Library of Congress as a gesture of the United States' respect for the meeting, justifying the request because "he did not like politics." Khakassia's Kishteyev supported Mongush's

comments on April 27, yet added that Mongush himself already had established his power in Tuva, and losing an election to a Buryat shaman would diminish Mongush's status, a potential motive for his outspoken opposition. Elections are scheduled for late 2009.

Buddhists Content with Religious Situation

¶10. (SBU) The majority Buddhist population in Tuva -- approximately 65 percent of all residents -- enjoyed freedom of worship without constraint, a sharp contrast to early Soviet terror unleashed on Buddhist monks and the subsequent strain of Communist atheism. Aside from a new Russian Orthodox cathedral and a few Buddhist temples, Kyzyl did not have any other obvious halls of worship. Republic of Tuva head for religious affairs Oorzhak Dadar-oolovich told us that only a few Protestant groups existed in Tuva, largely because of the difficulty for missionaries to travel to and work in the region (Note: the republic registered only 9,000 foreign visitors in 2008, 96 of whom were Americans visitors). He did note that an Old Believer group lived in utter isolation from the rest of Tuvan society in the north of the region, abiding by their own laws and practices. Dadar-oolovich attributed the spirit of religious freedom in Tuva, to some degree, to the republic's history of religious persecution. Shaman Mongush claimed, however, that the government had discriminated against him as the head shaman of the republic, refusing to grant him ownership rights of the house he had lived and worked in since the Soviet era. Dadar-oolovich explained that the Tuvan government had offered to build and equip Mongush with a new house and worship center in a different part of town, but refused to cede the plot located next to the Republic of Tuva House of Government in which Mongush currently lives.

Comment

¶11. (SBU) Tuva's future rests, to some degree, on the improvement of its transportation corridors, and local officials do not expect any major developments in the next ten years. Once it does establish a direct rail link with the rest of Siberia, whether the republic's vast natural resources will be exploited depends on global demand for these materials.

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